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## AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A NOTED PIONEER

Written by E. W. H. ELLIS, of Goshen<sup>1</sup>

My father, William Robinson Ellis, was the son of Ezekiel Ellis an officer in the Revolution serving under General Washington, and was born in Windham county, Connecticut, April 6, 1784. His middle name he derived from his mother, Elizabeth Robinson, of whose family I know nothing. He was a man of common school education for that period. Studied medicine. I don't know where, with Dr. Winter Hewett, a man of some note in his profession, who died in Batavia, Genesee county, New York. My father practiced his profession awhile in Windsor, Vermont, afterwards at German Flats, Herkimer county and at Penfield, Ontario county, New York. In 1808 he was married to Hannah Brown, daughter of Capt. Isaac Brown, who commanded a company of drafted men in the War of 1812. His residence was in the town of Locke, Cayuga county, New York. During the War of 1812, in addition to the duties of his profession, my father engaged in merchandise in Penfield, some 10 miles from Rochester, New York, then in the county of Ontario, but since known as Monroe county. On the proclamation of peace in 1815, owing to the great downfall in prices, and the dishonesty of his partners, his financial prospects were ruined, and he was forced to close business and sacrifice all his means.

At this place I was born on the 28th day of April, 1815. Another family occupied the upper story of the house, one Erastus Yeomans, to which also came a son on the same date. If I formed any acquaintance with the chap I have long since forgotten him, but in his honor or his fathers, I am christened Erastus. My father's preceptor also had to be remembered and thus was added the two middle names making in all a name that but few have heard in full, or can remember—Erastus Winter Hewett Ellis.

In the year 1820, in company with my uncle, Daniel Ellis, my father determined to try his fortunes in the far west and accordingly embarked in an humble craft, skiff or scow, I can not say what, at

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Ellis died at his home in Goshen October, 10, 1876. He was serving as postmaster of the city at the time of his death.

Ocean Point on the Alleghany river, descended to Pittsburg and thence floated down the Ohio to Cincinnati. I can barely remember this place from the hearing of an organ as we passed one of the churches. We settled at Jacksonburg, a small town in Butler county, Ohio, when my school days began. My first teacher was Peter Muntz who died a few years since in Elkhart county, Indiana, in whose possession I found a school book published by my father entitled *A Minor to Noah Webster's Spelling Book*. I learned rapidly in reading and orthography and at the age of seven was regarded in all that country round as a prodigy in spelling. My father, who was sometimes a teacher himself, took pride in showing me off, and I was the champion in all the spelling matches in the neighborhood. I am a tolerable speller yet, but I have had a good many bad spells since I was a boy.

Owing to his disappointments in business, my father became discontented and restless and although always successful as a practitioner, he never remained long in any one place, but removed from point to point, going as far west as Leavenworth, Indiana, and then step by step back through Bellefontaine, Ohio, to Maumee, thence down the lake in April, 1826, to Buffalo, and thence to Knowlesville, New York, where my mother died on the first of November, 1828. She left surviving her myself, nearly 14 years of age, my brother W. R. Ellis, five years younger, my sister Lucy Ann born in 1822 and my brother Isaac Brown, born in 1824. The latter died in the Union army in 1863 or 1864 near Nashville, Tennessee.

While at Knowlesville I attended one term at Grainer's Academy in the study of Latin, and in the winter and spring of 1829 I taught school in the town of Royalton, Niagara county, New York in two several districts, for five months, and was just at the close of my term when my father who had always designed me for the medical profession, wrote me that he had found a situation for me to study medicine at Brockport, New York. I immediately started for home, walked fifteen miles to Knowlesville and having no money to pay my passage on the canal, I pawned my watch for a small sum and proceeded homewards. About the first of September, 1829, I accompanied my father to Brockport, to the office of Dr. John B. Elliot, a regular physician of considerable repute and success, and was received a few weeks on probation. We afterwards entered into a written obligation, whereby I agreed to remain with him dur-

ing my minority, to attend his drugstore and do whatever else was necessary about the office and house. He was to be my preceptor in medicine, and was to furnish me board and clothing, but I was to repay him when I should be able for the clothing advanced for the first two years. In other words I was to serve the first two years for my board and tuition.

Thus I was duly installed a student of medicine and remained with him for seven years. It was a pleasant family and I remember with affection Mrs. Joanna Elliot, who was to me during all this period of seven years more than a mother. I was regarded and treated more as a son than a stranger, and I owe much to them for my early training. Dr. Elliot and wife were earnest Presbyterians, very devoted and very zealous. I attended church with them almost constantly after the first year or two, and was for years librarian of the sabbath school and a member of the choir. I was an industrious student, always up at five in the morning, and seldom abed till eleven at night. During the day my time was mainly occupied in attendance upon the drug store, compounding medicines, posting books so that my morning and evening hours were necessarily devoted to the books. Besides my regular studies and the care of the store, I found leisure for miscellaneous reading, and at the age of sixteen began to write extensively in prose and verse, but at first anonymously, for the press. I wrote with a prolific pen for various literary papers of that day, but little of it I think survives in anyone's recollection. In the winter of 1833-4 I attended medical lectures at Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, and was a portion of the time a roommate of Dr. Daniel Brainard, recently of Chicago. On my return in the spring of 1834, I underwent an examination at Rochester, New York, and received my diploma shortly before my 19th birthday. The censors were pleased to say that I passed the best examination they had ever witnessed. From my early youth I had devoted much attention to politics and became an ardent Jacksonian Democrat. This often annoyed my worthy preceptor, who boasted that he was a Federalist of the old school, and we had many sharp contests on the matter, all however in good humor. In the year 1834 at the solicitation of many Democrats I assumed the editorial control of a paper at Brockport called the *Village Herald*, devoted to the success of the Democratic party, and the election of William L. Marcy as governor of the State. This paper continued

about four months. I also assisted in originating and conducting for one year *The Token* a literary paper, of which about 1,000 copies were issued semi-monthly. It was not much of a paper, but better I think than some I have since seen. I received my first political promotion in 1835 when I was appointed a commissioner of deeds for Monroe county, out of which I accumulated a little over one hundred dollars, this being my entire capital for the commencement of business for myself. I was also elected and commissioned by Governor Marcy a lieutenant in the militia, and won the military honors for a single year. I remained with Dr. Elliot until the first of August, 1836, when I set my face westward in the company of a number of families from Brockport, and arrived at Mishawaka, St. Joseph county, Indiana, about the seventh of the same month intent upon the practice of my profession. In the spring of 1837 my father having removed to South Bend, upon his solicitation I went to that point and engaged in business with him. The next year he removed to Elkhart, Indiana, and I accompanied him arriving in that town on my twenty-third birthday. Our business was extensive by day and by night. Throughout the country every house was a hospital, scarcely a family being unvisited with disease. We were however, very successful in combating the prevailing sickness and I had made up my mind to remain there for the future, when a slight circumstance changed the whole current and tenor of my life.

I had taken part in a Democratic county convention at Goshen, had been appointed a delegate and attended a Congressional convention at Lafayette, January 8, 1839, which nominated Gen. Tilghman A. Howard for Congress, and had thus become known as a Democratic politician. Soon after my return I was visited at Elkhart by the Hon. E. M. Chamberlain of Goshen, who came to solicitate me to take the editorial control of the Goshen *Democrat*, assuring me that it would not interfere with the duties of my profession.<sup>2</sup> It suited my taste exactly, and I soon acquiesced in the proposition, and about the twentieth of January, 1839, became a resident of Goshen. The proprietors of the *Democrat* office, of whom I now recollect Ebenezer Brown, E. M. Chamberlain, James Cook, John Jackson, Dempster Beatty and Albert Banta, agreed to compensate me with the munificent sum of two hundred dollars per annum and my board. The latter I had at James Cook's, which cost

<sup>2</sup> The *Democrat* is still one of the leading papers of Indiana.

my employers two dollars per week. I also purchased a share of the office. The office of the paper was on lot 123 on Main street. I soon found it impossible to continue the practice of medicine while I remained in the editorial chair, and the latter having peculiar attractions for me, after the first year I abandoned my profession entirely, although I have never regretted the time I devoted to its study. On the twenty-third of September, 1839, my father died at Elkart and is there buried. He was an honest man, an earnest devoted Christian. He often added to his duties of doctor of medicine, those of a minister of the gospel, and was generally a Methodist, but some times belonged to the United Brethren. I have often heard him in the pulpit, and have been a listener to much worse preaching since his day. At his death he was as poor in purse as any of the apostles. As a gentleman and a scholar, he would have ornamented a more exalted position, but Providence doomed him to a life of poverty, peace to his memory! Thousands of the poor at whose bedsides he had ministered still remember him with affection.

The circulation of the *Democrat* was small, not exceeding 400, while the amount of job printing and advertising was quite limited. I however applied myself to the work with diligence and economy, and finally succeeded in getting it on a paying basis, but it was by no means lucrative. For a long while it was the only Democratic paper north of the Wabash excepting the *Sentinel*<sup>3</sup> at Ft. Wayne and the paper circulated throughout this territory. I issued also an extra sheet during a portion of 1840 called the *St. Joseph County Democrat*, designed for circulation in St. Joseph County and the same year published the *Kinderhook Dutchman*, a campaign paper, devoted to the interests of the Democrat party, and the re-election of Martin Van Buren. Of this paper about 1,200 copies were issued, 100 being sent to subscribers at Indianapolis. In August, 1841, I was elected the first auditor of Elkhart county by about 150 votes over C. L. Murray and was re-elected in 1846. The office was a great help to me, although the pay at first was only six hundred dollars per annum. It enabled me to keep the *Democrat* going, and to accumulate a little property. I continued to discharge the duties of editor and auditor, doing all my own work, until, January, 1850,

<sup>3</sup> Founded by Thomas Tigar and Vance Noll, June, 1833. The oldest paper of the region was founded at South Bend, 1831.

<sup>4</sup> Files are still preserved by the Elkhart County Historical Society.

when having been elected by the Legislature, Auditor of the State of Indiana, I resigned both positions.

On the seventeenth day of May, 1842, I was married to Maria Crozier formerly of Chillicothe, Ohio, who was called away on the twenty-first day of April, 1846, leaving two orphan children, Sarah Annette and William R.

On the twenty-seventh day of January, 1848, I was again married to Jeannette Minerva, daughter of Ebenezer Brown. Her death occurred at Indianapolis on the 16th day of June, 1856, leaving one child surviving her, Emma Maria, also two children deceased buried in Goshen and two buried in Indianapolis.

On the seventeenth day of August, 1858, I was married to Rosalie Harris, widow of Leonard G. Harris and daughter of the late Samuel of Elkhart. In these several cases my domestic relations were of the most happy and agreeable nature, and I never cease to thank a kind Providence for the blessings therein vouchsafed me. If I had had no other joys in life this alone would compensate me for all its ills and make me thankful that I have had an existence. In January, 1850, after a tedious journey of a week we reached Indianapolis and I took charge of the auditor's office, in the building known as the Governor's House, on the **Governor's Circle**, the office I afterwards removed to a room in Masonic Hall. In the summer of 1850, Mr. John S. Spann and myself purchased of Jacob P. Chapman, the contract for the state printing, and the printing materials of the *Indiana State Sentinel*. Our duties under this contract we performed faithfully, printing among other documents, *The Revised Statutes* of 1852. Finding it desirable to have a paper connected with the business we commenced the publication of the *Indiana Statesman*, a weekly paper, which soon attained a circulation of over 2,000, which was continued two years, and of which I was editor. In the course of the publication I found myself at variance with the leaders of the Democratic party on the slavery question, adhering as I did, to the position of the party throughout the North, in the campaign of 1848, against the extension of slavery into the new territories. Owing to this position I was defeated for the re-nomination for auditor in 1852 by John P. Dunn, Esq., and retired in January, 1853, at the expiration of my three years' service. I took my final leave of the party in 1855 at the Democratic State Convention, when it was proposed to make the Border Ruffian policy

of the administration a test of party fealty. Within this period I was elected by the Legislature a commissioner of the Institute for the Education of the Blind, and was chosen secretary of the board, the Honorable Isaac Blackford being president of the same. This position I held about five years. I was also chosen a director and president of the Peru and Indianapolis Railroad Company. The work was then constructed from Indianapolis to Noblesville, a distance of twenty-two miles and ironed with a flat bar. I remained as president two years until the work was completed and in operation from Indianapolis to Peru. A consolidation was then made with the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad Company, whereby Hon. John Brough, afterwards Governor of Ohio, became the president of the entire line from Madison to Peru. In a few weeks Mr. Brough resigned this position and I was elected to fill his place. The consolidation was afterwards dissolved, and I remained president of the Madison & Indianapolis road for the term of two and one-half years, and then resigned and returned to Goshen. I was one of the directors of the Indiana and Illinois Central Railway and of two or three other lines in their incipency. I was induced to invest \$11,000 in a mercantile business in Goshen. The concern failed and I was compelled to sacrifice almost every dollar of my property, amounting to not less than \$40,000 to pay the indebtedness of the firm. In 1856 I was nominated on the first Republican State ticket as a candidate for Auditor of State. Oliver P. Morton was the candidate for Governor and Conrad Baker for lieutenant-governor. During the season I edited and published a campaign paper entitled *We the People* having a circulation of 7,000 copies weekly. The ticket was defeated by between 5,000 and 6,000 votes. Once more back in Goshen, poor and penniless, I purchased with C. W. Stephens the office of the *Elkhart County Times*, changing the name of the paper to the *Goshen Times*; for more than two years I was its editor, when for a very small consideration I parted with my interest to Mr. Stephens and thus closed my connections with the press. In 1858 I was elected again as auditor of Elkhart county and re-elected in 1862 making my entire service in that capacity the term of sixteen years. I was present at the National Convention in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was nominated for the Presidency and rendered my utmost aid to secure his election, an event which precipitated the Rebellion. A Peace Congress having



been proposed by Virginia, I was appointed by Governor O. P. Morton, a delegate for Indiana, in conjunction with Caleb B. Smith, P. A. Hackleman, Godlove S. Orth, and L. C. Slaughter. The two former are now deceased. My roommate at the Avenue House was Mr. Smith, afterwards Secretary of the Interior. Our congress met in a hall adjoining Willard Hotel, in Washington, was presided over by Ex-President John Tyler, and for a month was the scene of most earnest and angry discussion. The principal good anticipated for it on the part of the North, and all that it accomplished, was to postpone the commencement of hostilities until after the inauguration of President Lincoln. About the first of March that gentleman came in disguise and at the peril of his life in Baltimore to Washington.

During this period, with others, I had several interviews with General Scott, then in command in the city, who expressed his belief that the Rebellion was inevitable, and that the South would fight. He had but about 1,000 troops in the city, and those men dispersed in such a manner as to show to the best advantage, particularly on the twenty-second of February, Washington's birthday, when they paraded the streets in every direction, giving to spectators the idea of the presence of an immense body of troops. I remained in Washington until after the inauguration of President Lincoln and with other Indianaians called upon him and upon the retiring President, James Buchanan. Not the least interesting incident of this brief sojourn in Washington, was the great party at the residence of Stephen A. Douglas which was attended by most of our members. For this service in the Peace Congress the Legislature allowed us each the sum of four hundred dollars.

The Rebellion came on apace, the President called for 75,000 three months men, and throughout the War, and to its close, I devoted time and money, without stint, to the raising of troops, the care of soldiers' families, and the Sanitary Commission. My office was headquarters for everything connected with the War. Backed by friends in Goshen, I repaired to Indianapolis and urged upon Governor Morton the propriety of raising a regiment for three years service with headquarters in Goshen.

(April 9, 1873, I had written to this point, when Col. R. M. Johnston entered my office and announced the receipt of a telegram from Jackson, Michigan, stating Col. E. J. Wood had committed

suicide in the Hibbard House with a revolver. At request of the Masonic Lodge, I repaired to Jackson and brought the remains to Goshen, to his family. Colonel Wood was a graduate of Dartmouth College, the second colonel of the Forty-eighth Regiment of Indiana Volunteers, and had been for two years judge of the Common Pleas court. He was en route to Saginaw, when in a fit of mental aberration, he committed this act of self-destruction.)

Governor Morton received the application with favor, and in a few days after directed the organization of the Forty-eighth Regiment of Indiana Volunteers, and telegraphed to me an appointment as commandant of the camp, to raise the regiment. I proceeded immediately to work, and in a few days had made such progress that all the companies required had commenced their organization. The regiment was located two miles south of Goshen, on the new fair grounds, and subsequently by order of the regiment the place was designated as Camp Ellis. Declining the honor of the colonelcy I procured the appointment of Norman Eddy as colonel, M. B. Hascall as lieutenant colonel and Ruggs as major captain. My son, William R., entered as a private in Company I. E. J. Wood, captain, was appointed as sergeant, afterwards sergeant major of the regiment, and when he was mustered out of service at Savannah, after accompanying General Sherman on his march from Atlanta to the sea, he held the position of first lieutenant. For my services in connection with this organization I was allowed the sum of \$700.

When it became necessary to order a draft for recruits for the service the Governor appointed me as the enrolling officer for the county, and superintendent of the draft. I accordingly appointed deputies in each township, had the enrollment made and corrected, superintended the draft and took to Indianapolis 128 drafted men, many of them with their substitutes, most of whom became members of the Fifty-seventh Regiment Indiana Volunteers. Subsequently I was appointed deputy marshal of the county, and as such superintended further drafts at Kendallville, arrested fugitives, etc., filling this position for about one year, until near the close of the War, when the office was abolished. It is a gratification to me at this hour to feel that throughout the great struggle I rendered every aid in my power for the overthrow of the inhuman Rebellion, and to secure the crowning results of the victory. About the close of the war the Legislature elected me one of the State directors of

the Bank of the State of Indiana, the duties of which I discharged for one year, until the winding up of the institution. I was also appointed by Governor Baker as one of a board of commissioners to examine into some of the irregular transactions of the Sinking Fund Commission. In 1866 my last term as Auditor of Elkhart county terminated, making 16 years of service in that capacity. A longer period I presume than the office will be filled again by one individual. The last few years I have devoted to my private affairs, which I confess are in rather an unprosperous condition, but I hope some day to see the time when I can obey the Apostle's injunction "to owe no man." And it will be a source of gratification and of gratitude deep and profound, even should it leave me, as most likely it will without the possession of a dollar. I have striven to be honest with my fellow men and hope I have succeeded. I have endeavored to maintain a good reputation in the community, and have had many evidences of their esteem and confidence. For a few years I strove earnestly to secure the construction of a railroad from Goshen south *via* Warsaw to Peru, and was the president of an organization formed for that purpose. It however failed, and the line was changed to Wabash, and for the last two years I have been its secretary. Ever since its organization I have been a director and secretary of the Hydraulic Canal Company, and for most of the time its treasurer. I contributed also towards its construction the sum of 500 dollars. In 1872 I was the secretary of the Republican State convention at Indianapolis and was selected and elected as presidential elector for the Tenth District, and in the electoral college cast the vote of the district for Ulysses S. Grant for President and for Henry Wilson for Vice President.

The only official position I hold now is that of Trustee of the State Normal School located at Terre Haute, to which I was nominated by Governor Baker in the winter of 1872-3 and confirmed by the Senate.

These memoranda will not be complete without a statement of my connection with the Masonic institution. My father was a Mark Master Mason, and I grew up in the midst of the Anti-Masonic excitement of 1827-8 and the year succeeding. My sympathies were early enlisted for the order. I felt that it was persecuted unjustly, that it was slandered and maligned, and it needed no solicitation to induce me to apply for initiation to the lodge under

dispensation which met in the southwest corner of the old courthouse in 1846. Afterwards I became one of the charter members of Goshen Lodge No. 12, and was for several years its master. I also aided in the organization of Goshen Chapter No. 45 and have been for several years its High Priest, and am also the Thrice Illustrious Grand Master of Bashor Council of Royal and Select Masters. I have been Grand King and Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of the State. And on the introduction of the Scottish Rite in the State I received all the degrees up to, and including the thirty-third and was chosen the Grand Commander of the order in the State. Of Masonic songs, addresses, sketches and essays my labors have not been few: I hope their tendency has been to make men better and not worse.

Interspersed along the course of my life have been addresses, orations, speeches, sketches and essays innumerable. Not many remember them now—how few will do so after the lapse of a few brief years!

Looking back over the fifty-eight years of my existence, blessed with a temperament that enabled me always to look on the bright side and always hope for the best, I feel that I have enjoyed as much of earthly happiness as falls to the lot of man on the average. Many days of sadness and sorrow, of disappointments and loss have been mine, but I have striven to bear them with fortitude, and even with cheerfulness.

While I feel that I have not accomplished what I should have done, I have not been idle. My life has been at least a busy one, and as opportunity offered I trust a useful one. Certain it is that I have not put myself offensively forward for any of the public positions I have held, nor done a dishonest or dishonorable thing to secure them.

I have written this narrative for the entertainment of my children, and close it on my fifty-eighth birthday, this 29th day of April, 1873.